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ABSTRACT

Criticism of the apparent academic disregard of Old French at the undergraduate level includes suggestions on ways to expand the curriculum. Discussion of philology, historical grammar, student preparation, course requirements, and the history of language is developed. Benefits of medieval study relate to: (1) preparation for graduate study, (2) baroque and renaissance studies, (3) linguistic analysis, (4) grammar appreciation, and (5) literary perspective. The author comments on texts, personnel qualifications, and program articulation as major problems. (RL)

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THE TEACHING OF MEDIEVAL FRENCH

AT THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

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The Teaching of Medieval French

at the Undergraduate Level

In 1949 Léon Wagner published a volume of old and Middle French texts intended for students preparing for the "Certificat de Grammaire et Philologie Française" at the Sorbonne. In his introduction, M. Wagner makes a strong plea for what he calls "une formation française," i.e., a solid foundation in French language and literature and the history of ideas, from their origins to the modern period. In particular he urges the importance of a sound knowledge of Old French language and literature for teachers of French. He condemns the tacit agreement, accepted by many teachers of literature, that French literature begins in the 16th century with humanism, and argues that whoever neglects the continuity of French literature from its earliest manifestations to the present, presents an incomplete picture of the subject.

I submit that M. Wagner's opinion is sound and I propose to discuss the way in which the subject of Old French has been taught (or left untaught) in the United States and to make a few suggestions.

When consulting the catalogues of American universities, one cannot help but be baffled by the confusing terminology used to describe the offerings in Old French. Apart from the old confusion as to the meaning of the term "romance philology," sometimes used for the study of all romance languages and literatures of the Middle Ages and sometimes more specifically for the study of Old French lanuuage alone, there are additional difficulties. As an illustration let us look at the catalogue description of the courses offered by an eastern university:

"250 French Literature of the Middle Ages

Survey of medieval French literature in modern French translation with extensive readings in the principal genres.

258 History of the French language

A study of the origin of the French language and the history of its development to the present day.

351 French Historical Grammar

Internal History of the French language.

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352 Old French

Historical development of the language and its principal dialects.

353 Old French Literature

Readings in French literature through the fifteenth century."

What is the differenct between "study of the origin of the French language and the history of its development" and "historical development of the language and its principal dialects"? Why is "historical development of the language and its principal dialects," which presumably refers to the still continuing external (or social) development of the language, listed under Old French, whereas "internal history," which for all practical purposes ends with the classic age, is separated from it? Furthermore it is difficult to understand why the University of Connecticut offers three courses in the history of the language and only one in Old French literature in the original.

Another puzzling example is an advanced graduate course offered by Columbia University: "French G8017 - G8018 The aesthetic history of the French language." It sounds fascinating indeed, but what is it?

Most university catalogues would profit from a more accurate and detailed description of the courses they offer.

The field of Old French includes, in addition to Old French language and literature, historical grammar (history of the language), the study of Old Provençal language and literature, dialectal studies, and of course the study of specific problems in the field. Every American university whose catalogue I consulted makes the study of Old French a requirement for the Ph.D. in French. This implicit recognition of the importance of the subject would seem to make it superfluous to insist further on the role which medieval literature and ideas have played in the development of French culture, but the fact that these courses generally are offered only at the graduate level indicates that the acceptance of the fundamental importance of this subject for all French teachers is not as widespread as it should be.

The student may begin his medieval studies with a course in historical

grammar, and if he comes armed with an innate love for philology--which happens rarely--the course of historical grammar can profitably be taught for its own sake, but a prior knowledge of Old French makes it infinitely more meaningful. In the literature course, however, this knowledge is a sine qua non, since the texts must be read in the original if the course is to have any claim to scholarship. Under the most common present system the burden of teaching Old French is placed on the instructor in the literature course, taking valuable time and interfering with the student's attention to the material as literature. This does not make sense. Students are not permitted to take an 18th or 19th century literature course without first having demonstrated their proficiency in reading modern French. It is illogical and impractical that they should be permitted to take courses in Old French literature without first having qualified as competent readers of Old French.

The result of the situation which prevails in most universities has been unfortunate. The necessity of understanding Old French in order to read the texts has had the effect of turning what should be a graduate literature course into an elementary language course, in which a very limited number of texts are read and in which translation and explanation of grammar and syntax take up so much time that the literary aspect of the course suffers considerably. As one consequence, interest in the field is lacking among students because, among other reasons, they are left with the memory of a mad scramble through obscure texts, whose form and ideological content they have not had the time to understand and appreciate. If we agree that medieval literature should be taught to future teachers of French literature and culture, then we must also agree that it should be taught properly. This can be done only if the student is required to demonstrate his proficiency in reading Old French and his understanding of its structure before undertaking any further literary studies in the medieval field.

With this in mind it would certainly be unwise to preserve the traditional "Introduction to Medieval French" course, where the largest part of the course is devoted to the study of historical grammar and phonetics, based on some

knowledge of Latin. The tendency to give a disproportionate amount of time to the history of the language, as illustrated by the offerings referred to eariler, is detrimental to medieval literary studies.

A simple solution to the problem seems obvious: the offering of introductory courses at the undergraduate level, first in Old French language and second in medieval literature, with the first being a prerequisite for the second. The scope of these courses is important because of the specific double purpose: to prepare continuing students for more specialized studies in medieval literature at the graduate level and to introduce the field to the interested undergraduate. The first course should be taught as a language course, in which morphology and syntax are carefully studied through reading of representative texts, in which phonetics is studied only in relationship to Old French word forms, and in which the student is made aware of specific problems arising from manuscript texts. The second course would be a true literature course, studying for example the formation of genres, style and composition. Of course the student's mastery of Old French would continue to be developed in the second course. Depending upon the teacher's preference, collateral readings about medieval man and his world can be required as part of either the first or the second course or both.

Teaching Old French at the undergraduate level will prepare the student for advanced medieval studies at the graduate level. It will eliminate language problems in the study of renaissance and baroque texts. It will train the student in linguistic analysis and permit him to discover the development of the language in a more meaningful way than through historical grammar. It will give the future teacher of modern French valuable insight into the structure of the language and enable him to understand more clearly, for example, the negative constructions of modern French and the partitive article, which both take on new significance in the light of Old French usage.

Teaching Old French literature in the original at the undergraduate level will give the student a truer perspective of literary history and may spur the student to choose medieval studies for his specialty.

There are difficulties connected with the offering of the proposed courses. One is the lack of good editions of complete texts for the use of American students. The volumes in the series Classiques Francais du Moyen Age are not satisfactory for textbook use for American beginning students, because the glossaries and notes are inadequate. There have been some good selective reprints for textbook purposes such as V. L. Dedeck-Hery's edition of the life of Saint Alexis, the Arnold and Pelan edition of the Roman de Brut, and Albert Henry's edition of Le Jeu de Saint Nicholas (although I question the wisdom of giving a complete translation in a textbook which is intended to be used to train the student to exercise his analytical powers). If it were generally accepted that there is a definite need for undergraduate courses in Old French and such courses were offered, the result would be a larger sale of these editions for textbook purposes, which would in turn hopefully stimulate publishers' interest in bringing out additional suitable texts.

A second difficulty in offering Old French at the undergraduate level is the lack of competent personnel. However one may hope that by opening up the field earlier than is now customary, more students will be stimulated to choose medieval studies for their future specialisation and not to regard these only as a hurdle interfering with progress in their chosen field.

A third difficulty is the problem of time, but this is applicable to any undergraduate course. In the future, the improvement of the teaching of French at the high school level will lead to better prepared entering freshmen and will make available more time for such vital studies as Old French.

A reasonable compromise at the present time would be to offer the two undergraduate courses outlined above: one in Old French language and a second in medieval literature. These would be available to the student not going beyond the the B.A., but should be required for the M.A. This would insure a better foundation and a more complete education for future secondary and junior college teachers and would thus work towards a general improvement of French studies.

We witness today a great concern for the improvement of our educational system. As one result of this concern, language training in the high schools has improved in the last ten years. As I said, we must be prepared to receive better trained freshmen in the future and to contribute to the continued improvement by offering a broader and at the same time more thorough program to future college and university teachers of French.